Center for Immigration Studies

Backgrounder

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Postscript 9/11

Media Coverage of Terrorism and Immigration

By William McGowan

More than a year after the September 11 attacks, as congressional panelists bore in on CIA, FBI, and INS officials for intelligence missteps and egregious failures to communicate across agency lines, the media was equally unforgiving. The disclosures certainly did present a vivid portrait of government officials unable to "connect the dots." As *New York Times* editorialists said in a column headlined "While America Slept," the findings of this committee were "profoundly disturbing," the government's counter-terrorism efforts were little more than "anemic."[1]

As accurate as this performance review might have been, there was something just as distressing about the media's complete lack of self criticism of its own performance in the years preceding the calamity, which in hindsight also seems somewhat "anemic."

Although 9/11 was first and foremost a failure of law enforcement, intelligence, and immigration procedures, the journalistic establishment also bears some responsibility for the disarmed condition in which we found ourselves on September 11. For years that establishment looked at the issue of immigration largely through ideological, rose-colored glasses, and gave minimal attention to many of the numerous holes in the state and federal immigration net that September 11 revealed. (According to the INS, three of the 19 hijackers were here illegally on expired visas, and two were able to obtain valid visas despite being on U.S. intelligence agency watch lists.) It also cheerily perpetuated the erroneous notion that while the immigration system in the country was indeed chaotic, the blessings of this chaos clearly outweighed the costs, and that there were few onerous consequences for the nation as a whole.

The attacks brought down two of the biggest buildings in the world, killing several thousand people in the process. But they also shattered a decade of journalistic denial and avoidance that helped make the attacks possible in the first place. As terrorism expert Steven Emerson told a far less righteous House subcommittee a year before the September 11 attacks, "an absence of a vigilant media" has allowed terrorists to anchor themselves and operate here. [2]

September 11 has indeed spurred much of the media to report about immigration more vigilantly. Yet an analysis of immigration issues in the year following 9/11 shows that mainstream journalism still bears considerable evidence of a politically correct mindset. This mindset is largely reflected in a new solicitude toward Muslim and Arab immigrants and the place of Islam in a multicultural America, as well as enduring hostility to basic immigration reforms the 9/11 attacks would seem to have put beyond argument. And though 9/11 has made it more acceptable to highlight problems associated with immigration, it has not changed the climate of indifference and hostility to those arguing for immigration reform, however much the link between policy lapses and terrorism have been abundantly underscored, in evil and deadly ways.

After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing revealed that even then terrorists had exploited our dysfunctional visa system and our poor immigration screening procedures, U.S. officials overseas were supposed to tighten procedures governing screening procedures for visas issued to the more than 10 million foreigners who apply for them annually. (Approximately seven million of those who apply get them, including every one of the 9/11 hijackers.) But the screening system continued to be spectacularly lax and badly run. Consular officers did not gain access to FBI criminal databases, faced tremendous pressure to push the line forward, and worried about offending "the host country" by denying too many applications. In some cases, much of the day-to-day work was being performed by non-American nationals in embassy employ, their loyalties uncertain. This was distressingly true in Saudi Arabia, where 15 of the hijackers came from and where U.S.

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visa processors allowed through the system applications that were laughably incomplete, vague, and that should have been rejected. Responding to a question on destination in the U.S., one applicant answered "hotel."[3]

The Story Not Covered Pre-9/11

Before 9/11, the intelligence and law enforcement communities, along with immigration reformers, had been trying to draw attention to the disarray in the visa-issuance system. But aside from *The Washington Times*, which pegged off a 2000 *Backgrounder* from the Center for Immigration Studies, database searches show a minimal press response — the watchdog did not bark.[4]

There were considerable weaknesses in another area involving the monitoring of visitors — especially those using flights from Egypt and Saudi Arabia — and a lack of interest from the press as well. For a decade, federal officials had asked foreign airlines to electronically provide passenger lists when planes begin flights to the United States. These electronic transmissions, called the Advance Passenger Screening System, allow customs and immigration officers at points of arrival to get a head start on checking names against "watch lists" of high-risk passengers, which often takes considerable time given the fragmentation of various federal agencies' databases.

While 94 foreign airlines had extended cooperation, Egypt Air and Saudi Arabian Airlines refused for years to do so and continued to refuse, even after 9/11. A Saudi embassy spokesman quoted in a *New York Times* piece on Oct. 18 said: "At this time, hundreds of Saudi citizens are being detained and questioned with regard to the hijackings. A lot of them are innocent people. That number would probably quadruple if we shared advance information on air passengers with the United States."[5]

This was not a small story, especially in light of the billions in foreign aid we give both of those countries and how virulent their Muslim fundamentalist problems are. Yet a database search of the major newspapers reveals no attention was paid to this gap at all, aside from a breezy 1997 *New York Times* travel section piece aptly headlined "Zipping Through Customs."[6]

Visa policies involving foreign access to U.S. aviation also seem to have some glitches. Countries like Syria are barred from landing their planes in the United States because of Syria's support for terrorism. Syrian pilots, however, like a group who arrived several weeks after 9/11, can get U.S. visas for purposes of taking private flight-school instruction. But this situation, too, received no attention from any major American news organization until Fox News reported it in October 2001 — another revelatory "sin of omission."

Visa overstays are still another weak spot, both in terms of policies and press coverage. The Immigration Reform Act of 1996 was supposed to introduce a tracking system to match entries and exits (the number of overstays is estimated at two million, growing by 125,000 every year). But the system was never implemented, and the few press reports that addressed the issue gave prominence to minimizers, like a representative from the American Immigration Lawyers Association who told Congress recently that most overstays were "innocent" people spending "an extra week at Disneyworld."[7]

News organizations have also been remiss with respect to the opposition of academic institutions to the implementation of a much-needed system for monitoring student visa holders. (There are 500,000 foreign students in the country now, their exact whereabouts untracked; according to officials, one hijacker had a visa to study at a California Berlitz school but never showed up for class.)[8] Many of the colleges and universities who objected to student-visa tracking did so because they didn't want the bureaucratic hassles — they feared loss of revenue if foreign enrollments dipped (foreign students often pay full tuition), and because they felt that treating foreign students differently from American citizens was stigmatizing and discriminatory. This was a good story.

Good Stories Abound, Unreported. Another good story was the intense bureaucratic warfare within the INS over the failure to fund and implement this student-tracking program (formerly known as the Coordinated Interagency Partnership Regulating International Students, or CIPRIS, and now known as the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS). But again, on both of these angles, coverage was minimal, and the stories that did surface on the resistance in higher education cast academic anti-border types in a positive light.

Coverage of problems associated with illegal-immigrant access to state driver licenses and other documents used to establish false identity or avoid detection has also been remiss. According to authorities, many of the hijackers obtained multiple state driver licenses, using them to blend into society or to bolster false identities that made them difficult for law enforcement to identify or track. (Virginia, where a robust black market in licenses and official ID cards has flourished for at least four years, was a particularly easy mark — seven hijackers got identification documents there, courtesy of a network of cor-

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rupt lawyers and notaries public, as well as Latin American immigrants who knew the ropes and offered facilitation services.)[9] Yet when the subject of illegal-alien access to driver licenses got any press attention at all, most analyses presented it favorably, as a way for illegals to connect to mainstream society and economic opportunity, and as a way for them to feel more "personal independence."

A *New York Times* story about the situation in North Carolina published a month before September 11 cheered liberal licensing policies as a sign of illegal aliens' "increasing acceptance in society," and closed with a bit of victimology from a much-lauded emissary of Mexican President Vincente Fox, who scolded U.S. states that do not grant licenses to illegal immigrants. "These are the people who are building the roads in America," the emissary said caustically of license-less illegals. "But they're not allowed to drive on them."[10]

A similar lack of press scrutiny has extended to specialty licenses, such as the hazardous material (hazmat) permits that the FBI now suspected several dozen suspicious Middle Eastern immigrants sought through a Colorado truck-driving school. According to *Time* magazine, the men paid cash and did not use the school's job placement services — an important aspect of the program's appeal. They also could speak no English, relying on a translator they brought along, yet somehow passed the state's hazmat written exam, which is given only in English. Authorities suspect the men bribed state motor vehicle officials.[11]

In a less politically correct newsroom climate, a local or regional news organization like *The Rocky Mountain News* or *The Denver Post* might have taken notice or given a second look to some of the oddities involved here. But no notice was taken, and 18 months after September 11, authorities are still anxious that some of the 30,000 hazmat trucks out there might be turned into rolling bombs.

The ability of illegal immigrants to obtain bogus Social Security numbers — another permutation of the document fraud problem — was another story barely noticed before 9/11. No one has done definitive research on this point. But it is assumed that many of the hijackers got fraudulent Social Security numbers, because these would have been necessary to open bank accounts and obtain credit cards critical to their operation, and their temporary visas did not allow them to obtain them for work purposes. Social Security numbers were also essential to building false identities, which the September 11 terrorists and those in other sleeper cells still remaining here were able to establish.

Tens of thousands of other illegal immigrants have rigged the system to get numbers, and the government estimates that one in 12 foreigners obtaining this form of identification have done so with fake documents. Yet this story was reported on only after the attacks. What attention the problem got before was minimal to nonexistent, even though after the attacks, *The Washington Post* would refer to the scandal of improperly secured Social Security numbers as "an open secret."[12]

News that Mohammed Atta, and perhaps other hijackers, had had encounters with police in various places before the attacks underscored that policies barring local and state police law enforcement officials from communicating with the INS seemed to have played a role in leaving the door open, too.

According to post 9/11 analysis of records, Atta was summonsed by a traffic cop in Florida for driving without a valid license and was let go, even though his visa was out of status. He also failed to show up in court for this offense, though no officers went out looking for him afterward. Almost unbelievably, Atta landed a plane illegally at Miami Airport and was allowed to walk away, again with no communication between local officials and federal authorities.[13]

But research shows that few news organizations paid any attention to these non-communication policies, even when there were logical contexts to explore them, such as reports on illegal immigrant gangs in Los Angeles, one of the cities where such policies are in force. While some attention was paid to these so-called "sanctuary" policies when Rudolph Giuliani came to office in New York in the early 1990s, and reaffirmed what his predecessor had put in place, this law-and-order figure won widespread media praise for "realism" and for pro-immigrant sympathies such a policy reflected.

New-Found Reporting Rigor

In the days immediately following the attack, almost all major newspapers and networks, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, ABC News, and NPR played a fast game of catch-up. The attacks were a huge journalistic wake-up call, and most mainstream journalistic outlets produced a barrage of reports showing how lapses in the immigration system, including several noted above, contributed to the terrorists' entry and effectiveness.

The reporting has also been marked by explorations of other facets of the system, not exploited by the 9/11 hijackers but there for other terrorists to take advantage of.

One story done along these lines involved the number of illegal immigrants who have been formally ordered to be deported but have refused such orders, a category known as "absconders," who number, at a minimum, 314,000.[14]

Other stories involved those who arrived with suspicious visas and other documentation but were allowed into the country pending further review, a category known

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as "deferred inspection."[15] Many of these immigrants and visitors simply disappear, never showing up for said deferred inspection. According to a Justice Department report that was widely publicized, some of these immigrants later committed crimes such as rape and drug-trafficking.[16]

Airport Insecurity. Still another story that showed the new rigor involved the problem of non-citizen workers at major American airports, which makes security checks difficult if not impossible in the cases where illegal aliens supplied false identity papers to get the jobs in the first place. According to one NBC News report, 80 percent of the baggage screeners at Dulles Airport outside of Washington were non-citizens.[17]

This period also saw the first systematic bid to explore the ways in which terrorist operations finance themselves here, something that many terrorism specialists like Steve Emerson had been trying to get mainstream news organizations like NPR to do for some time, to little avail. Most significant were investigative reports, such as that produced by *The Washington Post*, which examined small-scale rings of Arab immigrant criminals whose profits have found their way into terrorist income flows, such as Hezbollah. According to such reports, Hezbollah has benefited from Arab immigrants involved in methamphetamine production and sales, counterfeiting name-brand clothing, credit card and identity theft, luggage theft, pick-pocketing and shoplifting, cigarette smuggling, and commercial fraud of all kinds.[18]

During this post 9/11 period, editorial policy shifted as well. Editorial writers at *The New York Times* even touted provisions of the 1996 Immigration Reform Act, which the paper had broadly attacked before, though carefully ignoring its own role in the neutering of these reforms.[19] The *Times* also now called for increasing security along our "porous borders" after years of reporting and commentary shot through with the assumption that illegal immigration was not such a big deal.[20]

Diversity Trumps National Defense. But while it would seem that the attack would leave an indelible impression, it was not the sweeping "transformation in our consciousness" as Geoffrey Wheatcroft, writing in *The New York Times Book Review,* has called it.[21] A reflexive, pro-diversity newsroom climate survives. Although the press has been willing to say that our immigration protections are in vast disarray, it has shown little inclination to highlight how a reduction in the flow of immigrants is critical to regaining the control we once had. The pro-diversity script also survives in the form of overly favorable coverage of the subject of Arab and Muslim Americans, who have become the objects de jure of journalistic piety and skittishness, as well as questions about the nature of Islam and the role it should play in American public life. Although many Muslim-Americans were appalled by the terrorist attacks, a larger proportion of that population than has been admitted have expressed approval. Those who warn about a foreign-born "fifth column" might have been overwrought. But 9/11 seemed to underscore that we needed to watch our backs as much as our borders.

Some news organizations, in the first flush after the attacks, found some disturbing evidence of questionable Muslim loyalty. *The Washington Post*'s Marc Fisher, for example, went to an Islamic school outside of D.C. and reported on the feelings of one South Asian eighth grader who said that "Being an American means nothing to me. I'm not even proud of telling my cousins in Pakistan that I'm American."[22]

As stark and as prevalent as these sentiments were some news organizations preferred not to see them, or interpret them for what they were. Six months after 9/11, *The New York Times* ran a report about a trip it took to an Islamic academy in New York, where the curriculum was only nominally Islamic, showing that Americans had little grounds for fear or mistrust.[23]

When *The New York Times* did highlight stark anti-American attitudes, these attitudes were seen through the lens of cultural relativism. Case in point: a *New York Times* piece on attitudes of Muslim teenagers in another private Islamic academy, in Brooklyn. According to the reporter, Susan Sachs, some of the Pakistani, Egyptian, Yemeni, and Palestinian immigrant teens interviewed for this piece have little feeling toward their new nation and think the ideal society would follow Islamic law and make no separation between religion and state. One 17-year-old boy, for instance, said he would support any leader he determined to be an observant Muslim who is fighting for an Islamic cause, even if that meant abandoning the United States or going to jail to avoid U.S. military service. Other students expressed "empathy for the young Muslims around the world who profess hated for America and Americans." Yet, instead of seeing such sentiments as worrying examples of dual loyalty (or no loyalty), Sachs tepidly described them as a sign of "the strain" that immigrants and their children traditionally can feel "between their adopted and native culture."[24]

More active, adult terrorist sympathizers have gotten easy treatment, too. When most of the prominent

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Muslims invited to the White House after 9/11 were identified as known sympathizers with other terrorist causes in the Middle East, the story and its implications got little play. On Oct. 19, 2001, *The New York Times* made mention that before 9/11, "incendiary anti-American messages" were long a "staple" at some Muslim events, but that the attack had prompted influential American-Muslim clerics to "temper their tone."[25] But the story of incendiary rhetoric should have been reported long ago. But the ongoing militancy of some of these clerics after September 11, despite such tone-tempering directives, has not been a journalistic priority. The journalistic mainstream has also been reluctant to do the investigative work required to declare that mosques are not being used in some cases as sanctuaries or recruiting grounds, even though the FBI has shown that past terror plotters used such houses of worship.

The Two Faces of Islam. Islam in the West is a complicated phenomenon, with both benign and aggressive faces. But Islam was strictly "a religion of peace," as an October NBC News report declared, veiling its more violent and hegemonic sides.[26] And while there are many American Muslims who are Islamic in name only — "cultural" Muslims as *The New York Times* described them, like secular Jews — the most ascendant strain of institutional Islam in America takes its force from radical Wahabi-ism, which is dominated by extremist and radical clerics who have no record of promoting loyalty to America or peace with entities deemed enemies of Islam.[27]

Another story in *The New York Times* announced that a high-ranking U.S. Army Muslim chaplain had been counseling Muslim soldiers that it was indeed morally right for them to fight and kill fellow Muslims from hostile nations.[28] But the story neglected to bring the issue of Muslim servicemen's resistance to fighting fellow Muslims down to the ground by examining just how demoralizing and divisive the issue has been for quite some time, particularly in units where Muslims serve in any numbers and where many commanders worry about ethnic insubordination.

A sidebar story that could be done, and which has not, has been the significant under-representation of Muslims in the service. (According to the Pentagon in 2001, there were only 4,000 Muslims in the entire armed forces, in a country with a Muslim population now thought to be approximately three million.) This severe under-representation could serve as a journalistic springboard to discuss the problem of dual loyalty or Muslim resistance to "Americanization," but it has not. Instead, the *Times* ran an analysis highlighting high rates of enlistment among young immigrant New Yorkers, carefully avoiding the larger issue of disproportionately low national enlistment rates among Muslim newcomers.[29]

Indeed, the whole issue of Muslim and Arab immigrant assimilation has been given only the most glancing attention, and stories bearing directly on the dreaded subject of dual loyalty have been almost entirely ignored. As John Leo, one of the few clear voices on this problem, has written: "We need a serious discussion about loyalty and assimilation." What we have gotten, Leo says, is a "massive cloud of hands-off nonjudgementalism."[30]

Ground Zero in Newsroom PC

The story that most underscored the press' inability to discuss Muslim loyalty occurred in September 2002 and involved six young Muslim American men in the Buffalo suburb of Lackawana charged with providing material support to Al Qaeda terrorists.

According to the government, these young men — all U.S. citizens, five out of six born in America — had traveled to Afghanistan, just before the 9/11 attacks, and had received training from Al Qaeda military operatives, who taught them how to fire rifles. They had also heard indoctrination lectures, including one by Bin Laden himself. According to the government, these men were then sent home to America, to await activation orders. (It should be noted that when CIA officials used an unmanned drone to shoot missiles at a high-ranking Al Qaeda operative in Yemen in November 2002, a man who was riding alongside him in the car was the Arab-American said to be the recruiter for the Lackawana cell.)

While hardly conclusive, the evidence that the government presented in bail hearings was not unpersuasive. The men gave contradictory accounts of where they had traveled, with some admitting to going to Afghanistan while others maintained they had merely gone to Pakistan for religious instruction. At least one of the men looked as if he might have engineered the loss of his passport to avoid raising red flags. When their homes were searched, the government found that one of the men had numerous Social Security numbers and credit cards in several names. The government also found ominous e-mail messages. "The next meal will be very huge," one email message said, an allusion to an upcoming attack. "No one will be able to withstand it, except those with faith." Most significantly, they kept their secret for more than a year, even after September 11.[31] Although the government would have surely benefited from hearing about where the men had been and what they had learned about Al Qaeda while there, they remained silent.

Besides the immediate factual issues, the case raised disturbing questions about the workings of the assimilation process for third world immigrants in insular places like Lackawana's Yemeni community. More importantly, it raised issues of divided loyalties. To some, it sug-

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gested the nightmare scenario: a "fifth column" of Muslim Americans more loyal to a religious vision than to the secular vision of their homeland, with intimate knowledge of the operations of our mortal enemies, as well as a community which might have known about the suspicious activity but did not inform authorities. As John Leo also wrote: "Does the nation have a right to expect that Muslim Americans will report any such activity they happen to observe?"[32]

The Silent "Watchdog." Reporters have an obligation to subject the government's case to as much skepticism and scrutiny as the defense arguments of the accused. But in covering the bail hearings of the so-called Lackawana Six, most coverage tended to favor the defense arguments that the six were "all American boys" who had merely been caught up in a religious misadventure. "They didn't go with bad intentions," one NPR reporter strained to remind.[33] Reporters also seemed unduly swayed by defense claims that the government was on a witch hunt to find "another John Walker Lindh" and that racism and ethnic profiling was at the bottom of it all.

In the days immediately following the arrests, news organizations went out of the gate fast and hard with reports that accented the men's innocence. ABC News depicted the men as kindhearted and cordial members of the wider Lackawana community, reporting that one had been voted "most friendly" in high school. ABC News also reported that another taught troubled kids and that a third was the doting father of two boys.

Print reporting from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* bore the same exculpatory tendencies, with testimony from sources that could hardly be considered objective or balanced in their views. A mother of one of the suspects said that she knew her son, that he was a good boy, and that "everyone is telling lies."[34] The local imam, whose mosque was used by visiting fundamentalists when they came to Lackawana to recruit the men to go abroad for "religious instruction," insisted that when it was all over the government would be apologizing to the boys.[35] A piece by Michael Powell of *The Washington Post* quoted a local public school superintendent who explained that people in the Yemeni community "think the arrests were a mistake or a political act by the Bush administration to stir up an attack on Iraq." The piece also quoted a friend of the suspects who said: "If they drove over an animal on the highway, they would stop and give it CPR. These guys would not know how to kill anyone."[36]

One of the more scrambled efforts to throw doubt on the government charges came in the NPR reporting. In the days right after the arrests were announced, information from other more rigorous organizations was filtering in that the men had in fact visited Al Qaeda training camps. But NPR correspondent Jackie Northam chose to feature a historian from University of California at Davis who explained that the men had been recruited by a completely apolitical religious proselytizing group called "Tablighi Jamaat," who were about as dangerous as Jehovah's Witnesses. The group emphasized "jihad," the historian explained, but it was the "jihad of self" with no links to violence. While this may be so in general of this movement, the fact that Northam would shift to such exculpatory background reporting instead of acknowledging a rising body of evidence that the men were involved in Al Qaeda training networks suggests an approach to reporting based on "see no evil."[37]

Five of the six men arrested in Lackawana were native-born American citizens. The other was foreign born but had naturalized. Yet the community itself seemed to straddle some kind of cultural "no man's land" where the process of Americanization took a backseat to the self-conscious retention of traditional ways. The process of assimilation that makes foreign immigrants into Americans in other places seemed to work quite weakly in that insular place, if at all.

Some news organizations did describe that lack of assimilation. *The Buffalo News* described the Yemeni side of Lackawana as "A piece of ethnic America where the Arabic-speaking Al-Jazeera television station is beamed from Qatar through satellite dishes to Yemenite American homes; where young children answer 'salaam' when the cell phone rings, while older children travel to the Middle East to meet their future husband or wife; where soccer moms don't seem to exist, and where girls don't get to play soccer — or as some would say, football." [38]

To its credit, *The New York Times* told how "...the sense of having a foot in two worlds is common among the residents of Yemeni descent. Many of the young men in the neighborhood and some girls have been sent back to live with relatives in Yemen, part of their families' continuing struggle to connect their American offspring to their roots. It is also common for young men, including some of those involved in the terror case, to go to Yemen to select a wife... . The tradition has the effect of bringing a constant infusion of religious and socially conservative Yemeni culture to Lackawana, where it exists in uneasy partnership with the temptations of American life."[39]

Yet still somehow the reporting continued to emphasize the suspects' "all-American" aspects. The effects that the vast cultural differences between the Yemeni community and mainstream America might have on their level of loyalty to America were largely ignored.

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A New Media Shibboleth

The increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes, harassment, and discrimination has been another area of significant miscoverage: "Tough But Hopeful Weeks For The Muslims of Laramie;" "Isolated Family Finds Support and Reasons to Worry in Illinois;" "Parents Fear Their Children Will Be Targets of Bigotry."[40] In the first few months after the attack, not a day passed that there was not some kind of major story in *The New York Times* highlighting victimized Middle-Easterners during this time of "anti-Muslim fervor," as Jodi Wilgoren of the *Times* called it, and the networks were quick to follow its lead.[41] Of course, the press was right to report on this problem, especially in the cases — few but fiendish — where hate crimes, including murder, did occur. But a very strong case can be made that the issue got way more attention than the evidence dictated, and that reporters were lax in verifying the truthfulness of some presumed victims.

A mid-October *Times* story, "Christian Arabs, Too, Are Harassed," by Gustav Niebuhr, was built on nothing but claims of harassment, citing no police reports and referencing the experience, relayed third-hand, of one Arab teenager taunted at school for looking "like Osama."[42] The piece actually closed with a quote from an Arab-American academic in Cleveland who said people have in fact been more sympathetic to Arabs since 9/11. This was a confusing and contradictory quote, at best, and made one wonder how closely the headline writer, under pressure to have the piece fit an approved script, actually read the copy.

Another *Times* story, by Somini Sengupta, closed ominously with an anecdote relayed second-hand of an Indian-American who, her intermediary source said, was "chilled to the bone" in the process of parking his car "by a volley of threats and insults from a white man who had stepped out of his house" in New Jersey.[43] There were also a raft of newspaper and network stories built around complaints from Arab cab drivers and local Arab political leaders of verbal abuse from passengers and callers — and not much more.

"Crying Wolf" Tales of Victimization. Other harassment reports have been pure "cry wolf," such as the case of Ahmad Saad Nasim, a student at Arizona State University. On Sept. 13, Nasim claimed to have been attacked by a gang of white assailants who screamed, "Die, Muslim, die!"[44] The claim was given considerable state and national media coverage and resulted in more than 50 fearful Muslim students leaving the ASU campus. But when police questioned him after he was found bound and gagged in a university library, he confessed to having fabricated the first assault — and staging the library incident as well — a confession that did not receive anywhere near the attention the original "hate" attack received.

Some of the hate crimes that got reported were actually crimes committed by immigrants against their own. A case of murder involving a Somali man who was found bludgeoned to death on a bridge in a rural county in Washington State automatically set off accusations from rights organizations that hate was at the root. In fact, this alleged victim of hateful Americans was actually beaten to death by fellow Somalis. After a night of drinking, they had grown angry at him when he urinated on the floor of a drug dealer's house and tried to steal a pocketful of music CDs.

To be fair, there was some isolated corrective reporting that disparaged the anti-Muslim storyline. In January 2002, four months after the harassment story took root, Alan Cooperman of *The Washington Post*, for instance, reported that federal law enforcement officials had gone through nationwide crime data associated with the charge and found the data lacking. Wrote Cooperman: "The notion that there has been a rash of retaliatory murders across the country, some investigators say, is an urban myth driven by anti-discrimination campaigners, sensational media reports, and traumatized crime victims seeking some explanation for senseless acts of violence."[45]

The same held for nonviolent acts of discrimination too. In June, *The New Jersey Law Journal* analyzed the evidence and concluded that anti-Muslim acts are quite rare. It quoted one anti-discrimination lawyer who said that in terms of anti-Muslim bias, "basically we are not seeing anything."[46]

Yet the storyline endures, as Arab American rights organizations continue to publicize erroneous claims and much of the media, like *The New York Times*, continues to echo them, without adding the important caveat that many of the cases cited in these accusations simply lack merit.

Like the largely press-created "epidemic" of black-church burnings in 1996, the so-called "spasm of anti-Muslim fervor" was based on reporting that lacked foundation. Just as in that earlier case, it was a storyline used by racial activists to advance an agenda that the press' unexamined emotional and political givens made them more than ready to amplify.

Curbing Civil Liberties. The alleged erosion of constitutional protections, especially in the case of immigrant Arabs — some legal, some illegal — detained in the anti-terrorist crackdown is another story slathered thick with politically correct pieties. As civil libertarians press their case that the detention of Arab immigrants represents violations of core U.S. freedoms and abuse of government authority, news organizations have often echoed them, ignoring important legal distinctions courts have affirmed between rights of citizens and resident aliens and those of visa-holders and the undocumented.

In a week when it could have done some investigative reporting about the manhunt for the 100 terrorist

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suspects the FBI couldn't locate at the time, or about the issues associated with detainees who would not cooperate, the Oct. 21 *New York Times Magazine* preferred to run a 3,000-plus word piece about the "Kafkaesque" ordeal of a "soulful"-eyed Saudi radiologist in Texas who spent 13 days in federal detention before being released with no charges. This was a revealing example of journalistic priorities. Worse, though, was the credulousness, or calculation, of the *Times* reporter, Deborah Sontag. The radiologist's detention, the Texas director of the ACLU told Sontag, "makes those of us Arabs and Muslims who are American think, 'Are we living in a country as dirty as the ones we ran from?'"[47]

The same credulousness could be seen a year later, in reporting that continued to dwell on how inhospitable America had become to new Muslim immigrants and visitors. One such offended guest was the son of a Muslim diplomat who had overstayed his visa by six weeks and had spent the same amount of time in jail after a sweep. According to *The New York Times*, this man declared that he was now glad to leave. "I don't want to be here anymore, anyway," he huffed.[48] Left unsaid, however, was how this sentiment squared with the fact that added security and widened law enforcement powers has had no impact at all on the rate of visa requests from the Muslim countries in question.[49]

The Los Angeles Times wasn't to be outdone in victimology either, running a sob-sister piece on Oct. 7 about three illegal-alien Yemeni siblings innocently caught up in the sweep, one of whom has been in the country for 12 years and has been defying a deportation order since April. "It was beyond humiliation" the fugitive's 23-year-old sister said, referring to the way the neighbors looked into the open front door of their shared apartment as officers came and went. Later at the detention facility, she was initially denied the right to wear her veil. "I lost my dignity right there," said the woman. The fugitive brother had been listed as a second driver on insurance papers for a car that a material witness in the World Trade Center investigation had rented. Still, *The Times* made it seem as if it was ridiculous that the three were ever detained — and dangerous if they were sent back to Yemen, where they "could suffer retribution for their Western ways."[50]

Indeed, stories in the first few months after the attack dwelling on the supposed lack of effectiveness of the dragnet, which downplay the successes such steps have had ("Hundreds of arrests, but promising leads unravel" — *New York Times*[51]), might have spoken less to the fundamental innocence of the detainees than to the impossibility of fighting terrorist cells under current legal rules of engagement, which bar interrogation tactics other nations can employ. Stories disparaging the dragnet's effectiveness also don't account for the fact that even with restrictive rules, the FBI believes it has disrupted several additional terrorist operations and might even be holding up to 10 al-Qaeda members.

Profiling. Media antagonism to government terror-fighting tactics was most pronounced in reference to "ethnic profiling." There was undeniable evidence that had the FBI allowed its Phoenix office to investigate the suspicious number of Arab immigrants who were taking flight training there (and elsewhere) and not balked at what it considered ethnic profiling, the plot surrounding the 9/11 attacks might have been exposed. There was also evidence that the media's anti-profiling impulses, a reflection of broader PC anxiety, had played a role in shaping the climate that made FBI supervisors in Washington wary of allowing the Phoenix FBI office to proceed. As Nicolas Kristof of *The New York Times* put it in a rare moment of institutional self-criticism, "As long as we're pointing fingers (at FBI lapses), we should look in the mirror."[52] Yet most of the reporting and commentary on this issue was hostile to ethnic profiling, even as no one really ever explained how any kind of effective preventative screening could take place without it.

Some of the most absurd rhetoric involved the parallels drawn between any kind of Arab ethnic profiling and the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II. The parallels originated in editorial columns and commentary but also made their way into news reporting and news analysis as well. Detaining Middle Eastern visitors, many in violation of visa status, is a far cry from the ugly act of putting Japanese American citizens away for the duration. Yet repeatedly, we heard moral equivalence.

One piece that underscored the way this unfounded notion drove much of the reporting was produced by *The Washington Post*'s Robert E. Pierre, who traveled to Dearborn, Mich., outside Detroit. There, he reported on the mounting fears and anxieties of Dearborn's large Arab American community, who were, according to one source, "scared to death" of being wrongly accused of terrorist associations. This community's American roots go back several generations. But Dearborn was also a place where authorities found what a federal indictment labeled a "sleeper operational combat cell," which was planning attacks in the United States, recruiting members, seeking to obtain weapons, and manufacturing false identification papers. Making no mention of the arrests of several of the cell's members just after September 11, Pierre instead focused on the near-hysterical apprehensions of Arab American there, who see themselves as one major attack away from internment. Pierre closed his piece with a quote from one Arab American: "Arabs who live in this country are Americans too. Haven't we learned anything since World War II? Sometimes I don't think so."[53]

The resumption of the PC script has also been marked by a diffusion of the reportorial rigor that was

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evident in the attack's initial aftermath, particularly that bearing on the institutional dysfunction of the INS. Gradually, the press has put less and less emphasis on the connection between 9/11-style terrorism and problems in the immigration process.

This was underscored most dramatically in the marked refusal to look at facts surrounding the INS' release of DC sniper suspect John Lee Malvo, an illegal immigrant from Jamaica. The 17-year-old Malvo had been smuggled into the United States as a stowaway, most likely through John Allen Muhammed, his 41 year-old partner in the sniper-killing spree. According to records, Malvo and his mother, also an illegal immigrant, were taken into local police custody in Bellingham, Wash., after the mother and John Muhammed fought over the boy at the homeless shelter where the two men were living. Malvo and the mother were both ordered detained, in keeping with provisions of federal immigration law which hold that stowaways should be deported immediately without the usual hearing that illegal aliens who have entered the country by other means have available to them. But top-level INS officials in Washington State overruled the Border Patrol and ordered that Malvo and mother be released on bond pending a hearing into their case. That hearing would not be held for a year, and judging from high rates of absconsion, Malvo and his mother would most likely never show up.

This decision represented a violation of federal law, and exposed a chronic rift between the Border Patrol, which generally wants laws to be enforced, and a highly politicized and overwhelmed INS hierarchy, which had basically given up on carrying out their sworn responsibilities to ensure the integrity of border controls and the integrity of immigration procedures. The action also cost at least 13 people their lives, as Malvo left INS custody to join his deranged and possibly politically motivated mentor in one of the nation's most confounding serial murder cases. More significantly, the release represented a dangerous bureaucratic obtuseness that could cost even more people their lives if a terrorist from the Al Qaeda group finds himself able to benefit from the same INS dysfunction.

With the stakes so high, and the implications so obvious, one might have expected mainstream news organizations to go after the INS for releasing Malvo, and to have examined the structural weaknesses, the policies, and the poor decision-making behind this release. Amazingly, however, with the exception of Fox News, almost every major news organization in the country refused to delve into the matter with any depth at all. While these organizations reported his detention and his release on bond pending a hearing, none of the major media organizations examined what an egregious lapse the release represented and how that agency's dysfunctional decision making could come back to haunt the country on a far more bloody scale sometime in the future, if these failures remain unaddressed.

A politically correct lack of rigor before 9/11 undercut the watchdog role the press should have been playing on immigration.

As I have argued in my book, *Coloring The News*, journalism infected with diversity orthodoxy has had real-world consequences beyond earning the press a bad name for being "PC." Politically correct journalism surrounding 9/11, especially its immigration-related aspects, has had adverse, real-world consequences, too. As much as some reporting has spurred an overdue tightening of the immigration net on some level, overall the journalism involved here has allowed too many confused and contradictory policies offering weak protections to endure. The lack of rigor in this journalism has in some ways obscured the nature and source of the threat (militant Islam) as well and what we should do to blunt that threat. Finally, I think it has diluted our moral outrage, contributing to a drift back into the indifference and apathy that made us vulnerable in the first place. Those working to correct conditions have found the press to be a headwind.

Whether September 11 should prompt a broad rewriting of immigration policy and immigration procedures is the subject of a fierce, ongoing debate. On one side are those favoring as open a system as possible, who claim the borders need not be closed, even after 9/11, and that law enforcement and intelligence agencies now have the tools to fight terrorism if they would just do their jobs well. On the other side are restrictionists, insisting that American citizens have a right to protection from the depredations of foreign non-citizens and that limitations on immigration, including a more selective approach to certain Middle Eastern nationals, are the only way to ensure that.

The failure of the terrorists to mount another catastrophic attack since 9/11 has helped immigration defenders to argue for keeping the borders as open as possible. Another big attack, however, will undoubtedly favor restrictionists. One thing is clear right now, though: The record shows that a politically correct lack of rigor before the attack undercut the watchdog role the press should have been playing on immigration. Despite the calamity that has befallen us, too much of a PC sensibility and the blindspots and victimology it encourages, has endured in the time since that awful event.

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Backgrounder

Postscript 9/11

Media Coverage of Terrorism and Immigration

More than a year after the September 11 attacks, as congressional panelists bore in on CIA, FBI, and INS officials for intelligence missteps and egregious failures to communicate across agency lines, the media was equally unforgiving. The disclosures certainly did present a vivid portrait of government officials unable to "connect the dots." As *New York Times* editorialists said in a column headlined "While America Slept," the findings of this committee were "profoundly disturbing," the government's counter-terrorism efforts were little more than "anemic."

As accurate as this performance review might have been, there was something just as distressing about the media's complete lack of self criticism of its own performance in the years preceding the calamity, which in hindsight also seems somewhat "anemic." A politically correct lack of rigor before 9/11 undercut the watchdog role the press should have been playing on immigration.

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